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A SIGN OF HOPE

Martinho da Costa Lopez Apostolic Administrator of the archdiocese of Dili, East Timor.

This is a story about a 'turbulent priest' that's how he was described, anyway in the Australian press. He looks quite ordinary and calm in this picture drawn from a recent photograph and though he has a sad expression here, the lines on his face may mean that in happier times he laughed a lot. His name is Martinho da Costa Lopez. He is Timorese and the first indigenous leader of the East Timorese Catholic Church.

During the early years of his life he studied in Portugal and at one stage he was a representative of the people of East Timor in the Portuguese parliament. He returned and spent some time as a parish priest in an outlying district and was recalled to Dili to assist in administration of the whole archdiocese of East Timor. Bishop Ribeiru in 1977 reluctantly left Dili because of ill health and Martinho da Costa Lopez was asked to take his place. He was appointed by the Vatican as Apostolic Administrator, the usual procedure prior to the official appointment of a Bishop. The Apostolic Administrator is responsible to Rome for the administration of his diocese.

To call him, as most do, 'the Bishop' is not merely a courtesy, but describes his function, and his relationship to the people of the church in East Timor. Neither the Vatican, nor the United Nations, has recognised Timor's so-called 'integration' into Indonesia.

The Bishop has been savagely attacked in the Australian press as an irresponsible opponent of 'integration'. But the Church is increasingly seen by people in East Timor as the only institution able to withstand the total political, social, economic, cultural and religious domination by Indonesia. As their feeling of absolute isolation increases within the international community, so does people's dependence on the protection of the Church.

If the Vatican were to effect the 'integration' of the Timor diocese into the Indonesian church and dismiss Bishop Lopes, this would be seen as a sad and dangerous event by his people.

The majority of the population in East Timor is Catholic and census figures indicate that the number of Catholics is rising rapidly as people look to the Church for refuge through five years of invasion, war, hunger and destruction.

The Bishop himself is a man of quiet disposition and forceful character and has had an extremely difficult task guiding the church and attempting to preserve the unity and faith of the people and their leaders. 'He is a most courageous man,' said one Indonesian who has been working in East Timor for many years. 'Few others are prepared to stand up to the military's threats and domination,' said another. One West Timorese, who for many years has been working with the Indonesian Government, first in preparation for the take-over of East Timor and subsequently in its integration process, described the Bishop as 'a 'sign' of hope for the people. . . If he goes, I cannot help but see the church fall to pieces in disunity,' he said. 'The church is the last rallying point that the people have,' said another.

Monsignor da Costa Lopez lives simply in Dili. People say that his house still doesn't have much furniture, but that the walls have been fixed recently with bamboo thatching so that the chickens can't get through the holes. He says mass at 5.30, and gets to his office by 7.30. Many people come to see him, parents and children, soldiers and civilians, all kinds of people. He doesn't talk much, but listens a lot. 'A father', people say, 'the only man who can describe the truth of the people in Timor.'

The Bishop has made some enemies. Initially he supported a group that encouraged the takeover of East Timor by the Indonesians and denounced Fretilin for fear that they might be influenced by the Communists. Subsequently he stood behind the people very strongly in their request for an independent vote about the future of East Timor. Pressure has been placed on him more recently to maintain a position of strict neutrality. Some people feel that the church should have nothing to do with politics, but others feel that humanitarian assistance offered by the church includes facilitating the right to political self-determination.

On September 10th, 1981, the Bishop was called to Baucau to speak with General Yusef, the head of the armed forces in Indonesia, about atrocities in a number of places in East Timor, particularly in the district of Lacluta. Present at the meeting was the Bupati of Baucau and at least two top level Indonesian government officials. On his return many senior army people in Dili questioned him and told him that rumours he had heard about atrocities were not true. He replied that not only were they true, but he had names of people, dates and place and even photos taken by the Indonesian army.

Not less than two days later in the city of Dili a number of people were captured, tortured and publicly murdered, without trial. The Bishop publicly denounced such incidents as had occurred in Lacluta, for fear, he said, that they happen again.

He has also spoken of the recurring danger of famine in East Timor and of conditions on the prison island of Ataura. He has pointed out the effects of military operations: the civilian deaths, hardship and fear, disruption of agricultural life.

Not many people in Timor, even in the church, speak of these things any more.